



AT RISE...

BY

John Sullivan

Our featured play for Issue #14 is “If Men Were Angels” by Lawrence DuKore. The piece covers a lot of U.S. political history through the twin lenses of theatre and the American immigrant experience. The play’s time frame toggles between the 30’s and the 50’s; its initial political context rests squarely in the turmoil of Depression-era radicalism – capitalism had failed largely and communism presented a fresh, dynamic alternative. The timeline then jump-cuts to the waning days of the “Red Scare” and the investigations of HUAC (the House of Representatives Un-American Activities Committee) that tore through Hollywood and the New York theatre world and left many radically inclined actors, writers and directors “blacklisted” by industry and virtually unemployable in the United States.

But the beating heart of DuKore’s play may be found in the dynamics among ensemble members of the Proletarian Theatre, directed by Demi Minotis, 1st gen son of Greek immigrants. Like many in those bleak days, this band of artists was committed to serving what they believed was a coming revolution led by the oppressed – though in Demi’s case, how committed was a constant bone of contention. Devotion to the cause and personal loyalties are recurring issues inside the ensemble, and a series of skirmishes pitting Demi’s personal agency as an artist against the machinations of Ben Myerson, a boots-on-the-ground functionary of the American Community

Party who was actually funding the Proletarians brings Demi's dedication to his own personal needs and career goals into sharp focus.

He climbs the ladder of success – doing “... whatever it takes to survive ...” - but ultimately the ghosts and betrayals and compromises he made during the “humiliation rituals” of the 50's Communist witch-hunts do catch up with Demi. How, and in what way, and what actions on his part gave rise to his regrets – and whether any of this even stemmed from a actual sense of remorse or was just another pro forma piece of performance? Or simply an apologia pro vita sua attempt at self-justification? Well ... you've got to read that for yourself. But I will say all the threads of plot and situation are tight, these characters compel your attention, their dialogue crackles, and the play's central focus, Demi Minotis, is a fascinating piece of work.

“If Men Were Angels” delves deep into the history of social theatre in the U.S. Proletarian ensemble members make mention of the Group Theatre and it's obvious that esteemed assemblage of theatre artists – a few more levels up the ladder of perfection - are exemplary models for this unsung company. The Group introduced America to the technical acting theories of Moscow Art Theatre director, Konstanin Slanislavski; this body of technique would ultimately become codified as The Method, a gold standard for generations of actors. And DuKore effectively evokes the paranoid ethos of the era of HUAC, the Senator Joseph McCarthy / Roy Cohn tag-team, and blacklisting. Does any of this resonate with what we've come to call “cancel culture” and the hypocritical churn in our own political maelstrom? It sure seems that way to me. “If Men Were Angels” is mos' def' not just a museum piece for the culturally curious; it speaks directly to the fears and tribulations of our current moment in time as well.

And we hope you notice the additional drama feature in this issue: an article – with action photos – on the venerable Bread & Puppet Theatre of Glover Vermont. The ensemble made a stop on their fall tour in Houston Texas and I was fortunate enough to be in the audience. This unique company specializing in pageants and politically infused sketches – some delightfully barbed comedy / some too deep and dark for laughter - using imagistic puppet sculptures has been hard at it since the early 1960's, and many can recall their activist involvement in street actions and demonstrations against various wars, nuclear weapons and their proliferation, imperialism and, most recently, the threat of fossil fuels to our planet's future. Please tell us if you enjoy this feature; there are more of them in the works. *JS*